**2.2 Gender categories**

Young children's gender categories are highly stereotyped. This can lead to assured predictions of an individual's preferences based upon knowledge of their gender, and the kinds of activities that they may typically engage in. Children develop such rigid gender categories in their search for certainty about gender. These categories are essentialist, having a simple in-group and out-group distinction that children use for understanding masculinity and femininity, and for defining their own gender identity. However, because the categories they use are inflexible, this leads them to make mistakes about gender. Given these distinctive characteristics of young children's gender categories, we can describe children as being *naively certain* about gender.

How might the construction of children's gender categories lead them to believe that gender may not be stable throughout life? Although a few people may change their gender identity, as adults we need a sophisticated understanding of this, rather than a naive belief that when surface characteristics change (such as clothes and make-up) so does gender. Take a look at the quotation below:

*Johnny (age 41/2)* I'm going to be an airplane builder when I grow up.

*Jimmy (age 4)* When I grow up, I'll be a mommy.

*Johnny* No, you can't be a mommy. You have to be a daddy.

*Jimmy* No, I'm going to be a mommy.

*Johnny* No, you're not a girl, you can't be a mommy.

*Jimmy* Yes, I can.

Source: Kohlberg, 1966, p. 95

Jimmy, although of an age where he can presumably label himself as a boy, believes that he can be a mommy when he grows up. The current construction of his own gender identity does not restrict him to remaining the same gender throughout life. Why might this be? Research conducted by Bem (1989), described in Box 1, illustrates that young children look for certainty in gender categories that they construct using *social* and *cultural* characteristics. Bem's study reveals that young children's categories are less influenced by *biological* knowledge, and this, claims Bem, is principally because they simply do not have this knowledge.

**Box 1 What are young children's gender categories made of?**

In an experimental study, Bem (1989) found that only about half of 3, 4, and early 5-year-olds were able to draw upon biological knowledge (genitalia) in deciding whether pictures of nude toddlers were boys or girls. Most of the children who were successfully able to identify boys and girls from biological cues were subsequently able to categorise the same children consistently as boys or girls when they were shown pictures of them in clothes and with hairstyles characteristically associated with the opposite gender. In other words, most children who were able to categorise gender on the basis of biological cues were not swayed in their judgements by the contradictory gender-cues presented through surface appearances. Most of those children who could not correctly identify boys and girls from seeing their genitalia were more likely to decide the gender of the same child in subsequent pictures on the basis of appearance.

So early gender categorisation is particularly dependent upon social and cultural experiences. Perhaps this can help us to understand why young children make mistakes about the stability and constancy of gender, and why their gender categories are defined in highly stereotypical ways. As adults, we know that just because someone changes appearance from one gender to another (for a fancy dress party, for example), or just because they engage in activities that are considered to be typically appropriate to the opposite gender, they nevertheless remain the same gender. This is because our understanding of gender embodies both biological and social knowledge – our understanding of gender is complex and sophisticated. We understand (unlike young children) that changing our gender identity takes more than changing our outward appearance or the activities that we do. In addition, we also understand that just because someone prefers woodwork, football, and beer over needlework, netball, and wine, it does not necessarily mean that person is a man. This is because we are aware that the links between our stereotypes do not correspond neatly to being a man or a woman; there is indeed diversity with regard to gender in our society. However, if we were made to place a bet about someone's gender given particular characteristics, we might draw upon our stereotypical knowledge in doing so; but stereotypes cannot be relied upon, and as adults we know this.

Gradually, children's culturally defined gender categories are supplemented with biological knowledge. Children from about 5 years of age onwards learn that their own and others’ gender identity generally remains the same across time and across contexts. This is a profound development in the gradual construction of gender identity. As the gender categories that children develop become more reliable, they also become more flexible and are no longer essentialist. Children learn that there are **multiple gender identities**, masculinities and femininities, rather than one masculine and one feminine type. Children are still certain about gender, just as we generally are as adults; but this is now because, like adults’ categories, their categories become more reliable and adaptive.

**Definition**

**Multiple gender identities**

Masculinities and femininities, rather than one masculine and one feminine type. In any society there is a whole range of ways in which femininity can masculinity can be expressed.

Although gender categories become more flexible, they continue to work as powerful social tools. The gender categories used in the construction of gender identity are actively maintained and re-constructed throughout our lives. But, as our fourth question asks, how does this come about? Francis (1997, 1998) has conducted some interesting research with school children, that examines the construction and maintenance of their gender identities. This research is described in Box 2.

**Box 2 Gender identity and gender maintenance**

Francis (1997, 1998) asked primary school children (aged 7 to 11 years) to engage in some pretend role play. The groups of children were asked to choose between play situations of a hospital, hotel, or school, and they had to choose the roles that they were going to play from a set provided. Francis observed the children's play and examined their talk. In choosing their roles, boys took the high-status positions of doctor, manager and head teacher slightly more often than girls. Those boys taking high-status positions used their role to exert domination and power far more often than did girls.

The gender roles the boys took on and constructed could be described as ‘typically masculine’ and those of the girls as ‘typically feminine’. Particularly when playing in mixed groups, the children constructed the gender roles as oppositional to each other. In general, Francis found that the girls took on sensible, selfless, mature, and facilitating behaviours, and boys took on silly, selfish, immature, and demanding behaviours. Such gender-typical behaviours correspond to previous research with school children which has consistently found girls at school to be diligent, sensible and quiet and boys to be rowdy, disruptive, and preoccupied with violence. Francis interprets the children's constructions of oppositional gender roles to be part of a process of identity maintenance.

Adoption of typical gender identities generated situations in the role play in which the girls (typically feminine) behaviours, such as willingly accepting low-status roles, and facilitating the role play with their sensible suggestions, supported the boys' (typically masculine) behaviours of taking up high-status roles and behaving in a demanding and selfish way. Francis notes how the girls' adoption of such feminine positions is simply demonstrative of socially appropriate feminine behaviour, which she describes as exemplifying a ‘properly female’ identity.

Francis is careful to point out that these gender-appropriate identities and behaviours were not taken up by all children; instead, they were fluid, and some children challenged or ignored them. Francis suggests that children work quite hard in constructing and maintaining their gender identities; but it also highlights that the behaviours typical of masculine and feminine roles are not binding, and that there is opportunity for diversity. Why are gender categories and gender identities not fixed? One reason, as Francis points out, is that gender constructions are only one part of our identities, alongside ethnicity and social class, for example. Sometimes the influences of these other factors may reinforce those of gender; at other times they may outweigh them, and this affords diversity. Because many factors interact in the construction of identity, there can be no single masculinity or femininity; there must instead be a diversity of masculinities and femininities.

This section has discussed the typical pattern of gender identity development and has shown that gender is crucial to identity and our understanding of who we are. But just as there is diversity in terms of masculinity and femininity, there is diversity too in children's acquisition of gender identity. Children have different experiences and develop at different rates. It is also important to note that research takes place at a particular time, and in a particular place, so the story of the typical may also be culturally biased.

**Summary**

* Children's developing understanding of gender can be described as a search for certainty.
* Young children make mistakes about gender illustrating their rigidity and their naive certainty regarding gender.
* As children's knowledge of gender grows in complexity, basic biological knowledge is added to their social-cultural understanding.
* Research by Francis illustrating girls' ‘sensible-selfless’ and boys' ‘silly-selfish’ behaviour demonstrates how gender identities are constructed and maintained.
* Children's knowledge of gender in relation to their own identity and that of others develops both in terms of flexibility (in that they can accommodate diversity) and in reliability.
* Masculine and feminine identities are not fixed, partly because identities are multidimensional. Diversity arises through the existence of masculinities and femininities.

It is possible to continue to follow this story of what is typical through investigating how constructions and perceptions of gender identities may affect experience of school and subsequently performance at school. One could explore the claim that performance in exams may to a certain extent be dependent upon gender, both in terms of one's own identity, and in terms of how schooling as a social process deals with masculinity and femininity.